



## **Dawn R. Hightree**

**Class:** Senior

**Major:** History

**Minor:** Art History

Having a diverse cultural background, I have been influenced by my experiences living abroad. In the summer of 2003, I traveled to Greece and Italy with the Kentucky Institute for International Studies program. With the assistance of a Murray State Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Activity grant, I was able to conduct primary site research in Greece in my areas of interest, Ancient Greek Language and aesthetics. I plan to continue my studies abroad in the winter of 2004 in Cyprus and, after graduation, in both England and Greece. In the fall of 2005, I plan to pursue a Ph.D. in classical studies at the University of Illinois. I am currently the secretary of Phi Alpha Theta, the National Honor Society for the study of History, and vice president of Alpha Mu Gamma, the National Honor Society for the study of Foreign Languages.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Changing Patterns of Funerary Art in Greco-Roman Antiquity**

On-site research in the Mediterranean region and subsequent examination of library holdings have allowed an interpretation and comparison of a select grouping of funerary images with the intent of indicating logical transitions in style and the recurring use of certain symbolism. Primary examples used in the study include the relief sculpture of Attic grave stelae from the sixth through the fourth centuries B.C.E., first century C.E. Roman military tombstones from Britain, and a few examples of Roman children's sarcophagi from the first through the third century C.E.

## **FACULTY MENTOR**



**Zbynek "ZB" Smetana**, who received his Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 1997, is an assistant professor of the history of art in the MSU Department of Art. He has been at the university for seven years. Aside from the general introductory classes, he is responsible for all upper-level courses ranging from ancient art to baroque art. His research focuses primarily on Venetian Renaissance art, particularly that of Titian. More specifically, his work centers on social/cultural art history, and the creation and perception of self identity in conjunction with the changing role of artists within the culture.

## Changing Patterns of Funerary Art in Greco-Roman Antiquity

Before any particular funerary image can be dissected, defined and linked to another, later one, investigations into the beliefs and rituals associated with death, dying and sepulchral practices of the cultures are necessary. The particular religious influences and practices of the time that coexist with certain imagery aid in the understanding of peculiarities and sometimes can be used to answer certain questions about their dissemination from one area to another. For centuries in the ancient Greco-Roman past, similar cult and religious affectations inspired the beautiful, endearing representations of the deceased that provoke so many questions when viewed today.

Ancient Attica was given to somewhat superstitious beliefs about the death process, burial and the afterlife. The ancient Greeks paid particular attention to the details associated with burials, with certain steps followed to ensure that the deceased person's will was carried out and his soul protected and body disposed of with utmost respect. The popular disposal methods were inhumation (grave burial), cremation and burning. At different times, certain methods were necessary or preferred. Without a proper burial, the boatman Charon would refuse passage over the river Styx into the afterlife: "Without burial, it was believed that the unfortunate spirit of the dead must wander in eternal unrest, visiting with reproach his neglectful kinsman (Gulick, 1903)." Even in the event of a body lost during battle or at sea, friends and family were bound to erect a cenotaph, or empty monument, as a symbolic aspect of the funeral process in remembering the dead. A passerby who viewed an unburied corpse should have at least symbolically buried the body by throwing over it three handfuls of dirt or else he might forever be accursed and haunted by spirits of the dead. An example of this symbolic process occurs in Sophocles' play *Antigone*. Antigone insists on giving her brother, Polyneices, a symbolic burial since he had been denied a proper one by King Creon.

Much of this obligation to dispose of the deceased properly was owed also to the Eleusinian Mysteries and the belief in life after death, an earlier Egyptian concept borrowed by some, but not all,

Greeks (Gulick, 1903). It was popular to bury the dead with items from everyday life, specialty items specific to the person, and vessels decorated with scenes of the funeral process and mourning. Sometimes an obol or coin, believed to be the fare Charon demanded to cross the river Styx, would be placed in the mouth of the corpse and a honey cake would be placed beside the corpse to appease Cerberus, the guardian dog of the underworld.

The Greeks were particularly attracted to the idea of the *kalos thanatos*, or good death, i.e., death in battle or some other heroic feat. Such beliefs led to the development of several impressive styles of commemorative grave markers, or *stelae*. The permanent monument was an important element of this idea of remembering the dead. The earlier styles of this grave monument began as large pottery pieces in the form of libation vessels and later developed into the *stelae* that became more common.

Ancient Romans held several ritual beliefs similar to those of the Greeks and were also influenced by those of the Latin Etruscan peoples before them. A belief in the afterlife prevailed, but with varying views. The death rituals and burial process were of great concern and were usually arranged by professional undertakers. Unlike the Greeks, the Romans usually read an oration referred to as the *laudatio funebris*, or funerary praise, as an important aspect of commemorating death. This type of eulogy appeared in Attica only when a feat of particular heroism had been displayed. The popular Roman disposal methods were inhumations and cremations. There were popular practices associated with the burial processes early on, such as weighing down tombs and decapitating corpses to prevent the dead from haunting the living world. The dead, living in tombs, were said to have influence on the fortunes of those living, so revisiting the grave sites with food and drink was necessary. There was also the practice of burying with the corpse common items from everyday life, as the Greeks had done. Grave markings were popular for these reasons and were directly borrowed from the developed Greek tradition of commemorative *stelae*. Just as the *kalos thanatos* was favored by the Greeks, the concept of *memoria* or ensuring the memory of the deceased and

the values for which the deceased stood was favored by the Romans. Funerary monuments bore some testimony about the deceased by the family members who erected them (Anon, 2003). These beliefs later evolved into the Cult of the Ancestors that often included a pictorial commemoration of the deceased and other members of the family. Both cultures commemorated their dead on stelae, and the succeeding styles and images became more and more elaborate and imbued with meaning.

Having discussed the relevance of the Greco-Roman tradition in funerary practices and the direct borrowing of the stelae by the

Romans from the Greeks, I can now focus on the question of the iconographical content and the social and historic importance of these practices. The very earliest types of Attic stelae were tall, rectangular slabs crowned with a palmette or sphinx capital (Figure 1) and were inscribed with information about the deceased including their names and the dedication of person(s) having had it commissioned.



**Figure 1.** Sphinx capital from an Archaic funerary stele, c. 550-540 B.C.E.

Evidence suggests that on some early stelae, images of the deceased were painted on the shaft, but most traces of the paint have long since disappeared. Later, Archaic style kouros figures were dedicated either as monuments, particularly for athletes, or as offerings in the form of Apollo.

Here the heroic ideal was represented in a youthful, athletic and beautiful form. In the tradition of the Archaic kouros, the stelae were decorated with depictions of the deceased in peaceful repose as though calmly awaiting death or in the midst of daily life, imbued with ethos (Figure 2). The stele was then shortened in form and given an architectural enclosure, with a pediment atop the portrait or inscription. This was the predecessor to the extraordinary



**Figure 2.** Archaic funerary stele with man and kylix krater, 6th c. B.C.E.

classical style funerary stelae that are of the most exquisite design and that are laden with themes and symbols. These and the subsequent examples are the focus for the remainder of this investigation.



**Figure 3.** Grave stele of Eupheros, c. 420 B.C.E.

most commonly associated with images of strigils, shields, cuirasses, spears, helmets, paper scrolls and laurel leaves. A good example of this sort of representational method, one of the domestic roles is that of the grave stele of Eupheros, a 15-year-old boy (Figure 3). His grave gifts and stele were well preserved in the ancient Kerameikos cemetery in Athens. His stele depicts a youth holding a strigil, which was a common theme in the memorials of young men and athletes. A good example of the depiction of a man is from the stele of Dexileos (Figure 4). The inscription reads that he died in Nemea, age 20, one of the five knights who fell fighting on the front line in the Corinthian War. This stele gives evidence of the use of elaborate tools and fine craftsmanship, as can be noted



**Figure 4.** Grave stele of Dexileos, c. 394-393 B.C.E.



**Figure 5.** Grave stele of Ilissos, 4th c. B.C.E.

when viewing the multiple layers of relief and its dynamic composition. Reminiscent of the Parthenon frieze and other representations of the triumph of order over chaos, this scene may well represent his own symbolic triumph over death as his bravery is forever imposed on the stone stele. These two examples are especially valuable because of their dramatic differences in composition and their well-preserved condition. On the

stele of Ilissos, again the calm reserve used to depict the awareness of death is present in the eyes of both the father and son, and the weeping grandchild. The interplay between the generations of life represented, symbolizing the life cycle, and the awareness of death's finality are also a common occurrence (Figure 5). For women, popular motifs were important aspects of female life, such as weddings; crafts, especially weaving; and care of infants most prominently, and items such as a pyxis, jewelry, shells, handmaidens and loom weights were depicted. These domestic representations are valuable to us as insight into the daily lives of these people, particularly those of women, who were not allowed to socialize in public much and held no jobs in the political or public realm.

Great care was taken by both the artists and the persons responsible for erecting the monuments to stress the importance of the role of women as caretakers of the family and its moral conduct. The stele that depicts Ampharete with her grandchild is simply and elegantly a fond display of the adoration between a grandmother for a tiny infant, no doubt a moment intentionally captured



**Figure 6.** Grave stele of Ampharete with grandchild, c. 430-420 B.C.E.

to represent the character of the deceased (Figure 6). In a different sort of narrative, on the Stele for a Woman, *dexiosis*, the symbolic



**Figure 7.** Grave stele for a woman, late 5th c. B.C.E.

handshake between the living and the dead, is portrayed (Figure 7). This usually takes the form of an older member of a family grasping the hand of a younger child, signifying the cycle of life. The calm reserve displaying the idea of *ethos* dominates the scene and can either move the viewer to tears or bring the calm realization of its message. What is really impressive about this more complex narrative is its evolution from the less emotional domestic activities and its ability to

communicate this more delicate situation. On the famous stele of Hegeso, there are several more images having to do with the private lives of women (Figure 8). Hegeso appears in full bridal costume opposite a female maidservant, dressed in a barbarian long-sleeved chiton, who is holding out a pyxis containing her jewelry. As she gazes at her possessions, they become symbols of her life before death and her somber eyes bear subtle hints of the devastating early death of this beautiful young woman (Blummer, 1966). Such techniques in artistic representation have evolved far beyond the simple static characters from earlier funerary monuments. Monuments become more and more rich with association as the iconography unfolds:



**Figure 8.** Grave stele of Hegeso, c. 410 B.C.E

The memorial statue, like the corpse, both is and is not the deceased. Through the inscriptions engraved on its base, it has a voice: it hails the passerby, explains whose monument it is, and asks for a tribute of mourning (Humphreys, 1983).

We can see a progression into the goals and motifs of later depictions.

The next group of important transitional and representational funerary monuments to be discussed, that of the Roman military found in Britain from the first century C.E., are an even longer jump forward in style and theme. A blend of Etruscan and Hellenistic Greek influences, the tombstones of the Romans attest to the creation of a style influenced by, however independent from, the long-standing traditions of funerary commemoration. What is fascinating is the apparent rejection of purely symbolic motifs and generic occupational commemorations in exchange for much more specifically situationally representative narratives. The archaic belief that old age was a type of decay that was more to be dreaded than death itself was perpetuated for generations of young men who would gladly go off to battle to die (Humphreys, 1983). The belief in *memoria*, an obligatory commemoration of an ancestor, also provides a strong tool for the interpretation of Roman imagery. The first Roman funerary tombstones were influenced directly by Hellenistic Greek models; however, the design took on more of a household shrine shape (*aedicula*) with an arch instead of a pediment that framed a portrait bust or eventually a standing figure. The predecessors to the relief sculptures were clean-cut stones with only inscriptions carved into them, with the occasional decorated round or gabled roof. The inscriptions included only the deceased person's *tria nomina*, or combination of three personal names common at the time, his rank and age, sometimes length of service, and how he died. The three most common inscriptions to accompany a man's name and rank are *hic situs est* (here he lies), *heres faciendum curavit* (his heirs had this erected), and *heredes ex testamento faciendum curaverunt* (heirs erected this in accordance with the dead man's will). The reason for these commonly inscribed words is simply to reiterate the long-standing tradition in commemorating the dead properly and according to their desire.

Later monuments, the portrait busts and standing figures, utilize an amalgam of preexisting motifs, modified importantly by the use of veristic likeness and detailed uniforms and equipment. The desire to recreate a believable likeness of the deceased was a cornerstone of Roman *memoria*. This idea is dramatically different than the Greeks' use of idealized youth and beauty. The Roman idea of the heroic figure was that of the true representation of the man who died (Anderson, 1984). A valuable aspect of this style

of representation is the sheer plethora of historical information it provides about the attire, equipment and style of the different military positions. Such care in detail is taken on the tombstone of Marcus Favonius Facilis; the equipment of a 1st century C.E. centurion can be seen (Figure 9). His proud stance also attests to the effort to capture the personality traits important in the process of *memoria*. Interesting new iconography emerges too: the rosettes and stars signify prosperity, pine cones are connected to the cult worship of Cybele and to the life cycle, and the appearance of conch shells indicate sea voyages and contact with the

Mediterranean and barbaric worlds. The gradual embrace of all sorts of non-Roman ideas by the Romans signified a tradition molded by the specific experiences of the army. New styles quickly spread, as individuals transferred to different legions (Anderson). For instance, lions and sphinxes, previously used by the Greeks and, even earlier, by the Egyptians, come back into use as dual entities of protection and death. These have been used by many cultures after having spread from the East.



**Figure 9.** Tombstone of Marcus Favonius Facilis, c.1st c. C.E.

Another style in Roman military tombstones is that of the mounted cavalymen, or “rider stele,” that show the influence of Thracian religious beliefs. One of the main Thracian deities was a rider god. The emphasis on the connection between man and horse is deliberate here. The inscription on the tombstone of Longinus Sdapeze reveals that he was a *duplicarius*, one of the highest paid cavalry positions, from the first cavalry regiment of Thracians from the district of Sardica; was 40; saw 15 years of service; his heirs erected the tombstone according to his will (Figure 10). This, and the tombstone of Marcus Favonius Facilis, show exemplary detail of the scale-armored cuirass, a new type of defensive equipment, and the very elaborate bronze phaleræ covering the strap junctions on the horse's harness. The fallen

warrior appears to be in an almost fetal position underneath the horse. This is an unusual break with tradition, for it had not been customary to display the fallen foe underneath the horse. The strange occurrence of the heraldic creatures atop the stone draws again on older iconographical material that has been omitted from works of this time in favor of the newly acquired symbols (Anderson, 1984).



**Figure 10.** Tombstone of Longinus Sdapeze, c.1st c. C.E.

Also of interest is the style employed by some of the military sculptors of this time. In the example of the tombstone of Longinus Sdapeze, the sculptor was influenced by the style of sculpture preferred by the plebeian classes and adopted for use by the military in the Late Empire. The coexistence of these styles provokes even further inspection. Since the idea behind the plebeian style was to be less idealistic and more representative, it seems logical that the military classes would adopt this technique. The pride in their military endeavors was obvious in the theme of representation within a specific context on their grave monuments. A more veristic style developed, moving away from the commemoration of the dead, and culminating in the plebeian style. Much like the Egyptians before them, the Roman's display of their accomplishments took precedence over the classical style in their subsequent hierarchical representations.

The last to be discussed is the group of enigmatic decorative schemes and subjects in Roman children's sarcophagi. A number of Roman sarcophagi have been recovered that display themes and decorations that signify they were meant for children. Unusual themes and more uncommon symbolism are used in a fashion exclusive to children's sarcophagi. The first of these was that of the griffins. Whole sarcophagi in the early 1st century C.E. were covered in the repetitive heraldic pattern of griffins. They appear to be symbols, much like those of the sphinx and lion or dog, that are apotropaic, watching over the dead, and are associated with

both life and death, light and darkness, which are linked somewhat to Apollo and Dionysos. Cupids bringing the griffins drink may symbolize the taming of the creatures of the underworld.

The appearance of cupids is also curious in this context. The Romans had used cupids in visual representation before. Augustus and the Julio-Claudian dynasty used cupids to assert their descent from Venus and their status as demigods. This does not seem to have any connection to the children's sarcophagi, however. The strongest theory is that the cupids are "eternal children" whose versatility is exploited on the sarcophagi (Huskinson, 1996). The ability to exist interchangeably with human adults and children has specific allegorical value. Similar to the example of dexiosis for the Greeks, the cupids' nature in dealing with the maturation process of interfacing the child-adult world suggests a playful crossing between the worlds of the living and the dead, which is an especially suitable decoration for a child's coffin. Also, the idea of preserving the child in universal childhood could be used to comfort the bereaved (Huskinson). Although mysterious at first, the dissection of iconography in children's sarcophagi seems to present, ideologically, events that had previous debut in adult allegory and have been playfully manipulated to better represent the idea of children in the afterlife or the transition between the two worlds.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, my experiences in the Mediterranean region afforded me the opportunity to see firsthand the power of funerary commemoration and sparked my interest in further research into the mystery found in the iconographies of cultures past. The selected types of funerary practices and monuments studied seemed at first to have drastic differences, but as it turned out, interesting connections linked them all. The commemoration of the importance of an individual's life with either an ideal image or a specific likeness was at the center of design elements that the Greeks and Romans made standard. We can trace the iconography of the Greeks through the ideas of youth and idealized beauty. Although during the period researched there were no veristic portraits of the deceased Greeks, their domestic lives were depicted. There were many examples of Roman military memorials; therefore, we have an abundance of ideas to link thematically. The Roman practice of memoria and use of verism were most useful, as the images communicate a great deal of

information directly to the viewer. In all instances, though, the use of inscription filled in gaps. The most valuable result is insight given the viewer into the everyday lives and into monumental changes of these cultures over time. Transitions are always important in history, and visual representation is often the best link to those periods we have.

## References

Anderson, Alastair Scott. (1984). *Roman Military Tombstones*. Bucks, U.K.: Shire Publications Ltd.

Daily Life: Funeral and Burial Rites of the Romans. (n.d.). Retrieved October, 2003, from <http://library.thinkquest.org/26602/ceremonies.htm>.

Blumner, H. (1966). *The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks*. (Alice Zimmern, Trans.). New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc.

Gulick, Charles Burton. (1903). *The Life of the Ancient Greeks*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Houby-Nielson, Sanne. (1997). *Studies in Hellenistic Civilization VIII: Grave gifts, women, and conventional values in Hellenistic Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Humphreys, S.C. (1983). *The Family, Women, and Death: Comparative Studies*. London: Routledge.

Huskinson, Janet. (1996). *Roman Children's Sarcophagi: Their Decoration and Social Significance*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

*Figure 1.* Sphinx capital from an Archaic funerary stele, c. 550-540 B.C.E. (Image: Dawn R. Hightree)

*Figure 2.* Archaic funerary stele with man and kylix krater, 6th c. B.C.E. (Image: Dawn R. Hightree)

*Figure 3.* Grave stele of Eupheros, c. 420 B.C.E. (Image: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Odysseus Web Page: <http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21103m/00/lk03m016.jpg>)

*Figure 4.* Grave stele of Dexileos, c. 394-393 B.C.E. (Image: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Odysseus Web Page: <http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21103m/00/lk03m013.jpg>)

*Figure 5.* Grave stele of Ilissos, 4th c. B.C.E. (Image: National Museum, Athens Web Page <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/Stele.htm>)

*Figure 6.* Grave stele of Ampharete with grandchild, c. 430-420 B.C.E. (Image: Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Odysseus Web Page: <http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21103m/00/lk03m014.jpg>)

*Figure 7.* Grave stele for a woman, late 5th c. B.C.E. (Image: University of Colorado at Colorado Springs: <http://harpy.uccs.edu/greek/sculpt/stele4.jpg>)

*Figure 8.* Grave stele of Hegeso, c. 410 B.C.E (Image: Hellenic-Art: <http://www.hellenic-art.com/statues/hegeso.htm>)

*Figure 9.* Tombstone of Marcus Favonius Facilis, c.1st c. C.E. (Image: Colchester Museum: [http://www.colchestermuseums.org.uk/CM\\_html/toptens/cm\\_topten6.html](http://www.colchestermuseums.org.uk/CM_html/toptens/cm_topten6.html))

*Figure 10.* Tombstone of Longinus Sdapeze, c.1st c. C.E. (Image: Colchester Museum: [http://www.colchestermuseums.org.uk/CM\\_html/toptens/cm\\_topten6.html](http://www.colchestermuseums.org.uk/CM_html/toptens/cm_topten6.html))